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Front: *Hieronymus*  
C-type, metallic paper  
160 x 80 cm (or 100 x 50 cm)

Inside: *Salvator Rosa*  
C-type, metallic paper  
90 x 270 cm (variable)

Back top: *Homage to Landscape*  
C-type, metallic paper  
50 x 100 cm (or 80 x 160 cm)

Back bottom: *Interior 2*  
C-type, metallic paper  
50 x 100 cm (or 80 x 160 cm)

Sarah Smuts-Kennedy



## Sarah Smuts-Kennedy

## Ether

### Indecipherable Eloquence

Sarah Smuts-Kennedy's ethereal 'landscapes' are subtly nuanced meditations on the nature of meaning. These powerful images are the result of a process which is almost like stumbling through the dark. The final image is discovered as its making unfolds rather than by prior design, reflecting a search for insight into the possibilities for reality to be understood via imagery, albeit one which includes within itself recognition of its own problematic nature. This is by no means a casual or ambivalent process, indeed it is a rare thing for a contemporary artist's practice to be so wholly without cynicism. The genuineness with which this search is undertaken lends it plausibility; there is no pretension here.

How to articulate the ineffable? An arc stretches through romantic landscape painting, through

abstract practices within the modernist tradition, through the baroque, also cutting to the core of religious and spiritual iconography which seek to give visual form to certain professed truths: to describe, to communicate, to convince. Smuts-Kennedy locates her practice firmly within this continuum. While her images remain abstracted, they are simultaneously an attempt to very literally describe an actuality, akin to the intention of Malevich or Mondrian or Rothko to paint the absolute. However Smuts-Kennedy's practice is differentiated by its inbuilt assumption that such a quest is impossible, recognising it is exactly that which she seeks to articulate that cannot be articulated, and building this recognition fundamentally into her work. The crux of Smuts-Kennedy's practice resides in the fearless and persistent confrontation of this conundrum.

Through her perpetual manipulation of the image Smuts-Kennedy interrogates the ways in which meaning can be generated and communicated visually. Such smoke-and-mirrors style distortion, where a tiny wisp of a cloud is twisted into a dynamic and at times menacing sublime universe, is implicitly critical of the possibility of presenting truth. Instead what *is* conveyed via her work is the compelling and essential nature of this very human quest for understanding; not knowledge itself but the will to know, not sense itself but the will to *make* sense, itself oxymoronic. Smuts-Kennedy's insistence on the resilience of the unknown includes within it a kind of terrifying faith in the process of human discovery, if not its results.

Though her finished product takes the form of a photographic print, Smuts-Kennedy's process is undeniably painterly – she pushes form

and colour across a flat plane. The striking omission, however, is the *matter* of the paint. In essence what she is doing is painting with information, painting without matter. Likewise, the images themselves offer no solids. Alluding to clouds, they resolutely offer us only the ephemeral to visually rest upon. Describing the tension of searching, they permit no answers. The drama of the ineffable is played out not as a void – as in Rothko's paintings - but rather as a complex and dynamic environment, complete with cause and effect, action and consequence, and charged with a persistent sense of mystery. Smuts-Kennedy inhabits in earnest the dilemma of visualising the unfathomable, creating a body of work that manages to be at once conceptually rigorous yet romantic.

Jess MacNeil, July 2005